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ABSTRACT

Since 1977, federal agencies have followed standards set by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for collecting and presenting data on racial and ethnic populations. A policy directive at that time established four discrete racial categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Pacific Islander; Black; and White. As an alternative, OMB allowed five categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Pacific Islander; Black, not of Hispanic origin; Hispanic, and White, not of Hispanic origin. Since 1977, however, the racial and ethnic makeup of the country has changed, giving rise to the question of whether these five standard categories reflect the present population adequately. OMB and Congress have begun efforts to change the standards before the dress rehearsal for the 2000 Census. Changes in racial and ethnic makeup present special problems for the public schools, which collect data for various reporting purposes. The National Center for Education Statistics and the Office for Civil Rights sponsored two surveys, one at the school level, and the other at the state level about the racial and ethnic classification used to collect and report student data. The majority of the public schools, 55%, reported that they collect data only when a student initially registers at a school in the district. Another 17% reported that they also collect data when a student changes schools. Twenty-five percent of the schools collect racial and ethnic data annually. Seven percent of the schools reported using racial or ethnic designations in addition to the five standard categories, and these schools were more likely to be in the West. The category most frequently added was "Filipino." Other categories mentioned were "Middle Eastern" and various specific Asian nationalities, but none of these was mentioned by more than 4% of the schools. In the state survey, eight states reported using additional categories, with five using a "multiracial," category, and one an "other" category. Taking these responses into account, OMB is proposing new standards that classify racial populations as: (1) White; (2) Black or African American; (3) Asian; (4) Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; and (5) American Indian or Alaskan Native. For data on ethnicity, the categories are Hispanic or Latino and Not Hispanic or Latino. OMB did not add a multiracial category, but is allowing individuals to report more than one race when they self-identify. (Contains two tables, one figure, and five references.) (SLD)

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ISSUE BRIEF

Racial and Ethnic Classifications Used in U.S. Public Schools

July 1998

For the past 20 years, federal agencies have followed standards set forth by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for collecting and presenting data on racial and ethnic populations. In 1977, OMB Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 established four discrete racial categories (*American Indian or Alaskan Native*; *Asian or Pacific Islander*; *Black*; and *White*) and broke down ethnicity into *Hispanic origin* and *Not of Hispanic origin*. Alternatively, OMB allowed five combined race and ethnicity categories: *American Indian or Alaskan Native*; *Asian or Pacific Islander*; *Black, not of Hispanic origin*; *Hispanic*; and *White, not of Hispanic origin* (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

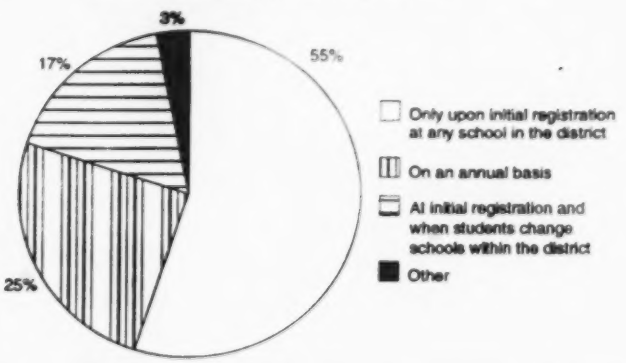
Using these standards, federal agencies have been able to collect comparable data on key population groups. Since 1977, however, the racial and ethnic makeup of the country has changed, giving rise to the question of whether the five standard categories reflect the diversity of the nation's present population. In 1993, OMB initiated a review of the classification system, Congress held hearings on the matter, and a federal research effort began. In 1997, Congress again held hearings on the standards as part of an effort to make any changes in time for the 1998 dress rehearsal for the 2000 Census.

Changes in the nation's racial and ethnic makeup present special problems to the public schools, which collect and aggregate race and ethnicity data for federal programs and other reporting purposes. Consequently, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the Department of Education sponsored two surveys, one at the school level and the other at the state level, about the racial and ethnic classifications used to collect and report data on students in public elementary and secondary schools. The school study was conducted in spring 1995; the state study, in 1997 (U.S. Department of Education, 1996 and 1998).

When and how are racial and ethnic data collected by the schools?

The majority of the nation's public schools—55 percent—reported that they collect information about race and ethnicity only when a student initially registers at any school in the district (figure 1). Another 17 percent indicated that they collect this information at initial registration and whenever students change schools within the district. Twenty-five percent of schools collect racial and ethnic data annually.

Figure 1.—When information about the race and ethnicity of students is usually obtained by public schools: 1995



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, *School Survey on Racial and Ethnic Classifications*, FRSS 53, 1995.

Schools reported using a variety of methods for collecting data on the race and ethnicity of their students. Seventy-three percent of schools (not shown in table) reported that parents or guardians were generally given the opportunity to identify the race and ethnicity of their children; 22 percent of schools (table 1) assigned students to racial and ethnic categories based on observation by a teacher or an administrator. The remaining 5 percent (not shown in table) indicated that the school followed some other procedure for collecting these data or that the information was not collected at the school but at the district office.

Schools in the Northeast and Central regions were more likely to use third-party identification than those in the Southeast and West (table 1). Schools in cities, when compared to the other three types of areas, were the least likely to use this procedure. Finally, schools with minority enrollments of 20 percent or more were less likely to rely on third-party identification than schools with 19 percent or less minority enrollment.

To what extent are additional categories used in current record-keeping?

Seven percent of schools reported using racial or ethnic designations in addition to the five standard categories (table 1). The use of additional categories was more prevalent in schools in the West, schools with 1,000 or more students, those in cities and urban fringe areas, and those with minority enrollments of 20 percent or more. Adding a separate *Filipino* category was most frequently mentioned by schools surveyed. Some schools also reported breaking down the *Asian or Pacific Islander* category into two separate categories. Other categories mentioned were *Middle Eastern* and various specific Asian nationalities such as *Chinese* and *Japanese*. However, no one of these additional categories was mentioned by more than 4 percent of schools surveyed.

Table 1.—Percentage of public schools using third-party identification and percentage using additional racial or ethnic categories, other than the standard federal classifications, by school characteristics: 1995

School characteristic	Third party identification allowed	Public schools using additional racial or ethnic categories
All public schools	**22**	**7**
Size of enrollment		
Less than 300	24	3
300 to 499	26	5
500 to 999	20	9
1,000 or more	16	16
Metropolitan status		
City	11	13
Urban fringe	22	11
Town	29	3
Rural	28	1
Geographic region		
Northeast	44	(+)
Southeast	14	1
Central	30	1
West	8	22
Percent minority enrollment in school*		
Less than 5	42	3
5–19	22	4
20–49	7	13
50 or more	10	12

(+) Less than 0.5 percent.

* Minority enrollment data were missing for about 4 percent of the sampled schools. These schools are not listed in this analysis but are included in the total and in analyses with other school characteristics.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, *School Survey on Racial and Ethnic Classifications*, FRSS 53, 1995.

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In the state survey, in 1997, eight states reported that they were using additional categories beyond the standard OMB categories to classify the race and ethnicity of their students. Five of the eight states—Florida, Georgia, Indiana, North Carolina, and Ohio—used a "multiracial" category. North Carolina also used an "other" category without specification, while Rhode Island used an "other" category only for limited English proficient and special education students. A "multiracial" or an "other" category cannot be aggregated into the standard five OMB categories. In addition, California separated *Filipino* from the *Asian or Pacific Islander* category, and Alaska separated the *American Indian or Alaskan Native* category into two categories. Three other states—Arizona, Kansas, and Maryland— reported they were considering modifying the categories, for example, by adding some form of a "multiracial" or "other" category.

Even within states, reporting has been inconsistent. For example, in Virginia, the city of Alexandria collects racial and ethnic data on students according to the five standard categories, but in adjoining Fairfax County, school officials have added a "multiracial" category to the student registration form. In California, local schools can decide which racial and ethnic categories to use. As a result, San Diego schools offer 19 racial and ethnic options, including a "multiracial" category, while San Francisco schools use nine options with no "multiracial" category (U.S. GAO, 1997).

Did schools believe that proposed revisions applied to their students?

During the public comment process, OMB received suggestions for revisions to the standard categories. In the survey of schools, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which eight of these revisions would apply to students in their schools (table 2). The proportion of schools reporting that these proposed revisions were *not an issue* or were *a minor issue* ranged from 69 to 93 percent. The proportion of schools reporting that any of the revisions was *a significant issue* ranged from 3 to 12 percent. Relatively few schools—1 to 11 percent—reported that they had *already included or were soon to implement* any of these revisions.

Table 2.—Percentage of public schools indicating whether suggested revisions to the standard federal categories for classifying race and ethnicity are a significant issue for students at their school or have already been/soon will be implemented: 1995

Suggested revision	Not an issue/minor issue	A significant issue	Already included or soon to be implemented
Adding a general "multiracial" category	69	12	6
Allowing individuals to write in a racial or an ethnic designation	69	10	9
Adding an "other" category	73	6	11
Changing the name of the "black" category to "African American"	73	10	4
Changing the name of the "American Indian or Alaskan Native" category to "Native American"	77	9	4
Adding specific combinations of the current categories	83	5	1
Including Native Hawaiian as a separate category or as part of a "Native American" category	93	3	1
Adding additional racial or ethnic designations	92	3	1

NOTE: Percentages do not sum to 100 percent because those responding "a moderate issue" are not shown.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, *School Survey on Racial and Ethnic Classifications*, FRSS 53, 1995.

What are the new standards, and when do they take effect?

In October 1997, OMB announced its decision about the revised standards for federal data on race and ethnicity. The new categories were used by the Census Bureau in the 2000 Census Dress Rehearsal in spring 1998 and will be used in the 2000 Census. The new standards are effective immediately for new and revised data collection; by January 1, 2003, all federal agencies are to be using the new standards.

For data on race, the categories are: *White, Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander,* and *American Indian or Alaska Native*. Note that the term *African American* was added to the *Black* category; and the *Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander* category was separated from the much larger *Asian or Other Pacific Islander* category. The *Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander* category includes persons descended from the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands. The *Asian* category is defined as persons descended from the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

For data on ethnicity, the categories are *Hispanic or Latino* and *Not Hispanic or Latino*. "Hispanic" is the term commonly used in the eastern U.S., while "Latino" is typical in the west. OMB hopes the use of both terms will encourage improved reporting.

OMB did not add a "multiracial" category, but is allowing individuals to report one or more races when they self-identify. Guidelines for implementing this decision, including questionnaire design, instructions, and tabulation specifications, are not complete at this time. In the next few months, further review by statistical and policy experts will take place, with recommendations to be submitted to OMB during 1998.

These decisions will impact many levels of government and many agencies. Users of racial and ethnic data are concerned about their ability to report trend data, given the new categories. For those who must collect and report racial and ethnic data to the federal government, including schools, there are concerns about the ease, cost, and timing of implementing the new systems.

In the state survey, states responded to questions about the estimated impact of possible changes to the racial and ethnic categories on the revision of data collection forms, changes in computer systems, and training of staff. The states that had already made changes in the categories they used to collect such data and therefore had some experience with such a process, generally estimated the degree of impact to be less than those states that were currently considering revisions or had no current plans for revision. Similarly, states that had made revisions estimated a shorter period of time required to implement changes in the categories than did those which had not.

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Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences are statistically significant at the .05 level. This **Issue Brief** was prepared by John Bare, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation; Anne Meek, Education Statistics Services Institute; and Mary Frase, National Center for Education Statistics. For information, contact Edith McArthur, National Center for Education Statistics, 202-219-1442 or Edith_McArthur @ed.gov. To order additional copies of this **Issue Brief** or other NCES publications, call 1-800-424-1616. NCES publications are also available on the Internet at http://nces.ed.gov.

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